

## Postmaster's Reward

One day President Zachary Taylor received a personal letter from F. C. Humble, postmaster at Salt Creek, Davis County, Iowa, stating that ninety-five cents constituted the quarterly receipts of that office. He added that the President might keep the whole amount as he had accepted the postmastership more for the accommodation of his neighbors than for the fees he would receive.

The remuneration of postmasters was then reckoned on the basis of postage receipts. According to Post Office Department regulations in 1847, postmasters were allowed a 40 per cent commission on income not exceeding \$100, and 33 1/3 per cent on sums over \$100 and not more than \$400. Above \$400 the percentage of retainable fees decreased in proportion to the increase in postage income. In addition, postmasters were authorized to keep 50 per cent of all sums arising from postage on newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets, and 7 per cent of the amount of postage on letters or packets received for distribution.

It is obvious that the compensation of postmasters before Iowa became thickly populated was usually small, sometimes negligible. Five dollars

a year, for example, was considered the average income at the Melrose (Monroe County) post-office in the early days.

Postage rates were reduced during the decade of 1845 to 1855. This might have affected the postmasters' interests more adversely had not the improved mail service and increasing population actually produced more total revenue. Previously the law required six cents to carry a letter of a single sheet less than thirty miles, twenty-five cents for any distance over 400 miles, and a graduated scale of rates for intervening distances. This regulation was probably responsible for the practice of folding the sheet of paper so that the address could be written on the back and thus eliminate the necessity for an envelope. In 1845 postal rates were based upon weight. Five cents had to be paid to send a letter weighing not more than one-half ounce 300 miles or less. For distances over 300 miles, the postage was ten cents, with an increase in rate depending upon the weight. Envelopes were still omitted for the sake of economy.

Postage on newspapers was much cheaper. No charge was made for any distance within thirty miles of the place of publication; one cent was charged for each paper when the distance was between thirty and one hundred miles; beyond that,

the cost was one and one-half cents each. More equitable rates for newspapers, based on weight, frequency of publication, and distance, were established in 1851.

If a person preferred to prepay the postage, a letter could be sent in 1851 for three cents. After 1855 all postage had to be prepaid and a single letter could be sent anywhere in the United States within 3000 miles for three cents. A letter was deemed "single" when its weight did not exceed one-half ounce. With the prepayment plan, instituted in 1847, stamps came into use. Government mail, however, could be sent free. Mail carriers, it was said, noticed the additional weight of their bags when Senators and Representatives remembered to send public documents to their constituents in the West.

In spite of the inconsiderable financial advantage, especially in the small settlements, the office of postmaster was sought. Perhaps the reward was largely abstract — standing and influence in the community arising from the trust the office involved. Nor was it improbable that with some generous-minded postmasters the office was essentially an "accommodation to the neighbors".

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